US Army Corps of Engineers®

Working Successfully with the Media and Public Affairs

Jennifer Lynch
USACE HQ Public Affairs Office

Presentation Overview

- Media Relations in a Disaster
- PAO/ATL Media Engagement
- FEMA's Media Policy
- Preparing for Interviews
- Exercises: Developing Personal Statements and On-Camera Interview

What We know about Communicating in Disasters

- Confusion surrounds the scene
- On-scene response is critical
- Events escalate
- Information is initially conflicting
- Public Interest soars initially
- External Influence is unavoidable

Working with the Media

Each medium has specific expectations of you:

- Television needs access to the “action visual”
- Radio news immediate audio or an interview
- Newspaper reporters need more detail and background information

All News Orgs Want

- Rapid response to questions
- Access to the scene
- Interviews with:
  - Policy makers
  - Response workers
  - Victims/survivors
- To meet their deadlines

Public Affairs Disaster Mission

- Provide accurate and timely information to the public and USACE employees regarding the potential consequences and appropriate actions to reduce risk.
- Contribute/provide information about the federal response and government assistance being provided, consistent with DHS ESF #15 Standard Operating Procedures, operational security and personnel safety.

PAO Disaster Response

- First line of PAO support is the local District and Division Public Affairs Office.
- Use PAO's as strategic advisor to get ahead of/trouble shoot issues.
- External Affairs PRTs will be stood up this year to support ESF #3 and ESF #15.
  - Intent is to support the local effort and provide the expertise to work within the Dept of Homeland Security's External Affairs structure.
- Capture the "firsts" of the ESF #3 Mission to visually tell our story.

Why do ATL's Need to Engage the Media?

- Media wants to speak to Responders/Subject Matter Experts.
- USACE's employees are the agency's best ambassadors.
- FEMA authorizes responders to speak to the media within the scope of their duties and responsibilities.

FEMA's Media Engagement Policy

"Talk about what you know and do"

FEMA's Media Policy

- If you own it or are responsible for it, you can talk about it.

"Talk about what you know and do"

FEMA's Media Engagement Policy

- Guidance allows for us to be proactive in working with, educating, and responding to the media during disasters.
- It's not an authorization to solicit interviews or pitch stories.

Staying in Your Lane

- Be straightforward and factual.
- Avoid speculation and opinions beyond your area of responsibility.
- If you don’t know, say so.
- Private information should not be released.
- Always be professional.
- When you’ve made your point, stop talking.

When to Refer to Public Affairs

Refer to Public Affairs if a reporter asks questions about:

- Multi-agency operations
- Policy or leadership decision-making
- Controversial subjects
- Costs
- Extent of damages
- Timelines of response

If you speak to the media…

- Get the reporter's name and contact info and report it back to the Public Affairs Office.
- Only provide information within your area of expertise—refer all other questions to Public Affairs.
- Be professional, factual and stay in your lane!!!

Developing Personal Media Statements Exercise

Use the following template to develop a personal statement; share with your group and pick one to share with the class.

- *Hello, my name is…*
- *This is what I do (in simple terms, avoiding jargon and acronyms)…*
- *This is how my job helps/protects/supports, etc. (emphasis on a positive verb)…*

Preparing for Media Interviews

As a Subject Matter Expert or Spokesperson

Five W's+1

- Who
- What
- Where
- When
- Why*
- How*

Before the Interview

- Key messages
- Likely questions and answers (Q&As)
- Difficult questions
- Quotable quotes--(think pearls of wisdom)
- Handouts
- Video/imagery if applicable

Approach to the Interview

- Stay positive, but realistic.
- Only speak about USACE.
- Do not repeat negative words from questions.
- Personify the mission of your organization.

Approach to the Interview

- Communicate technical details clearly.
- Avoid jargon and define any unavoidable technical terms.
- Work answers back to the response objectives: “The main issue is ___,” “Our priority continues to be____,” or “What is interesting is ____.”
- Work with PAO to follow up with reporter to maintain relations.

Before the Interview

- Know what you want to say – have two or three key messages.
- Know what you don't want to talk about and how you will avoid those topics.
- State your message ASAP and repeat it.
- Prepare and practice.

Before the Interview

- Who will be asking questions?
- What do they want to cover?
- Work with PAO to establish ground rules.
- Discuss interview length and format.
- Ask what other sources are being interviewed.

Message Overview

- Share only confirmed information, never speculate.
- Express honesty, empathy, concern, dedication and capability in 10-12 second sound bites.
- Use facts and figures to reinforce message. Cite outside experts and reports.

Message Overview

- Do not use ‘no comment’ as the public views it as admission of guilt.
  - Find an alternate phrase
  - Explain why you can’t answer: “But what I can say is…”
- Direct the public to take specific action, if necessary.

Crisis Response Statement

1) Express empathy
2) State your conclusion—the “fix” (BLUF 10 words or less)
3) Provide 2-3 facts (What, When, Where that support your conclusion)
4) Future actions (Who will do what by when), also what people should do

Tips for Good Messages

- Be proactive.
- Give positive messages; avoid negative words.
  - "In case of fire, use the stairs; stay calm"
- Include 3rd party attribution.
- Include stories and anecdotes.
  - "Let me tell you how we helped … in a similar case…"
- Include analogies or examples.

Non-Verbal Communication

- Physical cues that convey feelings.
- Non-verbal messages are more memorable and noticeable than spoken messages.

Some Basics with the Body

- Lean in
- Maintain eye contact
- Level eye contact if possible
- Square up
- Open arms and hands

Verbals that are Non-Verbals

- Changes in voice
  - Hesitation
  - Pitch
  - Um’s and ah’s or other un-necessaries
  - Speed
  - Specific word emphasis
  - Monotone vs. variation
  - Sentences not complete
  - Phrases
- Voice and body language are connected

Conducting Media Interviews

During the Interview

- Be ready with an overview statement.
- Choose your words carefully-- a wrong word can not be withdrawn.
- Follow-up questions are based on your responses.

During the Interview

- Start with an conclusion.
- Most important facts first.
- Be aware of chronological order.
- Provide the 5 W's + H (as appropriate).

Reporters Will Ask You

1) Your name, title, and agency
2) What happened? When? Where?
3) What is supposed to happen?
4) What caused the incident?
5) Anyone hurt? Killed? Missing?
6) Any danger now? To what?
7) Any impact on people?
8) What should families/public do?
9) What are you doing?
10) When will you have more info?

Choice of Words

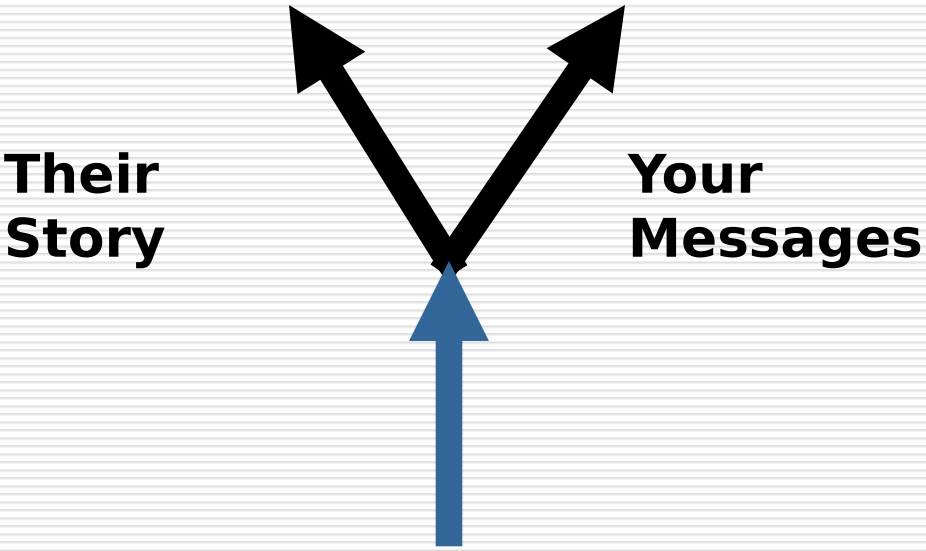
You have no control over the questions that you are asked.

But…

You have 100% control over your "choice of words"—how you answer those questions.

Bridging

"When you come to a fork in the road, take it!"



Bridging Techniques

How to get from the reporter's question to the message you want to deliver…

"The point is…"

"The important thing to for the public to know is…"

"What's key here is…"

"The point I would like to make is…"

"Our priority is…"

Bridging

Look out for “What if…”

- Avoid the request for an opinion or speculation.
- Return the interview to the facts that you are prepared to release, or to your key talking points. Think positive.
- Bridge examples:
  - “That’s not what happened”
  - “That’s highly unlikely because..”
  - “I’m not going to speculate on that…We’re here to talk about…”

About "Bad News"

- Bad news does not get better over time.
- People suspect that it is worse than it isn't.
- The faster you share bad news, the better.

Rules to Remember

- Tell the truth—the public forgives mistakes, not dishonesty.
- Microphone is always on.
- Avoid sarcasm and humor.
- Debates and attacks don’t work.
- Negatives will destroy your credibility.
- Take control.

After the Interview

- Keep everyone informed.
- Secure answers to questions that you didn’t know.
- Follow-up with reporter.
- Determine whether question should be included in fact sheet or web-site.

On-Camera Interview Exercise

- PAO has asked you to do an on-camera interview about the Corps' role in the disaster response.
- Prepare for the interview by developing a 10-12 second sound bite opening statement.

Scenario

Hurricane Alice

- Cat 3 Hurricane, landfall in Alabama, near Mobile
- 300,000 without power
- 6.8 million c.y. of debris
- 80,000 in shelters
- 12 ft. storm surge

Questions?

Contact:

Jennifer Lynch

USACE HQ, Public Affairs Office

Phone: (202) 761-1808

E-mail: jennifer.a.lynch@usace.army.mil